

A Bitter Winter

By Patricia A. Jackson; Illustrations by Mike Vilardi

In the unrelenting glare of Tatooine's twin suns, the Dune Sea appeared to be ablaze. Featureless interruptions of hardened loam and a massive expanse of desert swells created an infinite canopy of thermal combs. A low-lying wind blew across the dune crests, persistently pushing grit and sand into the *Steadfast's* docking boots.

On the advent of evening, the temperature pressed the indicator scales beyond maximum, stifling an anxious Drake Paulsen as he paced in the shadow of his Ghtroc light freighter, the *Steadfast*. Agitated, he snatched at the sleeves of his flight jacket and threw it up the ramp into the corridor. It was little comfort against the hot winds. The young Socorran brushed his hands through a shaggy brown mane of loose curls, subsequently fingering the golden earring at his left lobe.

Blowing in from the deep desert, the direction of the wind shifted abruptly. Like most of Tatooine, this particular place had no name, no merit, only a set of coordinates which had reached him through the trusted mouths of fellow smugglers. *Get to Tatooine; a friend of your father's is in trouble*. Precise coordinates and vector planes had followed. Conveying an urgency that went beyond its cryptic meaning, the information had been in Socorran, meticulously rehearsed by those ignorant of the language. Responding to that call, Drake had traveled half-way across the galaxy, arriving only moments before the prescribed hour.

A mournful wail echoed softly from the interior corridor of the *Steadfast*. Hands on his hips, Drake turned to the shadowed outline of his partner, the Wookiee Nikaede. Mentally translating words and phrases, he shrugged pensively, noting the curved outline of the bowcaster clasped in her hands. "You'll never pinpoint anything with that storm coming in," he growled, his voice unintentionally harsh.

Beyond the dimming horizon, a wall of sand and dust had created a massive opaque cloud that was moving in their direction. Keenly, Drake could hear the winds, a distant rumble that reverberated against the low-lying back of the ridge. "Just keep your eyes open," he grumbled and resumed his pacing.

Within an hour, the storm's forefront had arrived, blowing sand and stinging debris. Prepared to face the brunt of the storm, Drake donned his flight goggles. "Nikaede!" he shouted from the ramp. "Seal up the thrusters! This might get ugly."

Reminded of the ash storms that plagued his birth world, Drake stared into the storm, dissecting Tatooine and replacing each image with a vision of his homeworld, Socorro. These abrupt thoughts of home struck a nerve, stirring a terrible sense of misplacement and emptiness within him. Distracted, the young pirate did not notice the approach of danger until the sound of footsteps echoed above the wind. Startled, Drake turned, drawing his blaster in one fluid motion. "That'll be far enough!" he growled in Basic, recognizing the tattered robes and breath filter of a Tusken Raider. Cloaked in the violence of the wind, the desert scavenger paused briefly, regarding the pirate with cool arrogance before resuming his menacing advance.

"Move on!" Drake barked, as the intruder took another step closer, forcing him another step back. "I'm warning you," he hissed. His back met an abrupt resistance, the body of a second Tusken Raider. "Nikaede!" he shrieked, as other shadows began to move along the perimeter of his ship. Elbowing the desert scavenger, he bolted toward the ramp.

The raider stumbled back, doubled over, shedding rags and bits of cloth from its head. "Drake," its muffled voice cried. "It's me! Tait Ransom!"

Despite the raging dust cloud, Drake could not mistake the wild, black mane of hair that emerged from the disguise, nor the earthy brown face framed within it. "It is you!"

Roaring vehemently, Nikaede sprinted across the lowered ramp, cradling her modified bowcaster. She growled fiercely, moving protectively to her captain, who was surrounded by strangers. "Relax, Nik," Drake chuckled. "Look who it is."

"Still keeping the same company, I see," the smuggler grumbled, massaging a bruised rib. "Look, Drake," he said



curtly, "there isn't much time. I'm glad to see you got my message."

"You sent that distress call?"

"Not for myself," Tait replied. Pursing his thick lips, he whistled sharply, a wavering note that transcended the wind. In answer, several figures scurried across the sand, through the darkness, and toward the ship. They carried a limp, unmoving body between them as they approached. Struggling weakly, the human's face was bloated and flushed with fever, heavily scarred and mutilated.

"Toob!" Drake cried in horror. He recognized the hideous scars, knowing them to be nearly two years older than they appeared. One eye was missing, the socket smoothed over with a discolored patch of scaled skin. The other eye was not human, but rather a cybernetic implant that flashed intermittently, as if malfunctioning.

"It's a bitter winter when a smuggler reaches the end of his days," Tait whispered sadly. He stepped to the side of the ramp, ushering his men onto the freighter.

"What happened?" The Wookiee snarled with menace -- Drake silenced her with a stern glare. "Show them to my quarters!"

As the Socorran turned on him for answers, Ransom waved a dismissive hand before his face. "Forget the details, Drake, I don't really know them. I don't know what's wrong with him or how he got that way." Bending at the waist, he shook the sand from his breath filter, tapping it lightly against his heel. In an odd dialect, he motioned his people away from the *Steadfast*.

"Well what do you know?" Drake griped.

"He's dying," Tait whispered arrogantly. "And he'd be dead by now if I hadn't stuck my nose in it." He watched the Socorran carefully for a reaction. "Jabba has a quirk about people dying in his palace. A useless death is a senseless death. If it isn't entertaining or at least profitable, then it's bad luck. And Jabba hates bad luck." Shrugging, Tait started back into the storm. "He ordered us to dump him in the desert. Fortunately, I had a spice shipment to deliver and it gave me enough time to get the word out."

"But why?" Drake demanded. "Toob has never failed Jabba!"

"It's got nothing to do with failure, Drake." Recognizing the Socorran's temper, Tait hissed, "Don't get any fancy ideas, kid! This isn't Socorro and we're not talking about Abdi-Badawzi." He snatched Drake by the collar, pleased by the frightened glaze that clouded the boy's eyes. "This is the real league out here. Your daddy isn't here to pick up the pieces if you mess up." Releasing the Socorran, he whispered, "You're better off on the other side of the galaxy." Ransom donned his mask and breath filter. "Wait until the storm passes before you leave the planet." As silently as he had come, he vanished into the sandstorm.

Sprinting up the ramp, Drake initialized the closing sequence. A sudden gust of wind shook the *Steadfast*, rattling through the ventilation ducts and open cylinders. "Nikaede, anchor the landing struts and lock down every vent!" His voice echoed down the passage, muffled by the howling windstorm outside. "Make sure the drive coil shields are in place!"

Exiting the captain's quarters, the Wookiee roared her acknowledgement, pausing only briefly to stare at her partner and then into the cabin. A mournful wail escaped her toothy mouth.

"Don't worry," Drake whispered. "I'll see to him myself. Just get those vents closed and make sure the hyperdrive is functional. We might need to use it in a hurry." As the Wookiee retreated, the Socorran hesitated in the doorway of his personal quarters. Reluctantly, he stepped inside, forcing a long, shuddering breath into his lungs. Kneeling beside the built-in bunk frame, he stared at the withered figure beneath the blankets and watched as the old man shivered and moaned deliriously. Retrieving the medical kit and an antiseptic towel from inside, he gently dabbed at Toob's feverish forehead, frowning as the dirt and grit rubbed off onto the cloth, leaving behind the mutilated, sunburned flesh of the Corellian's face. "Toob?" he whispered.

Fluttering, the eye opened, its edges swollen and red with fever. Seated in the loosened socket of flesh, the cybernetic unit whirred noisily, focusing on the young pirate. Briefly, a thin smile parted Toob's blistered lips. "Drake," he mumbled hoarsely. "Is that really you, boy?"

"Who else?" Drake whispered. As he had so often done as a child, he took the smuggler's hand and pressed the palm against his forehead. Fighting back tears, he recalled the strength of that hand only 10 years ago and how it had once been able to cradle and protect him. Drake stared, unflinching, into the Corellian's ruined face, remembering how a traumatic encounter with a homemade thermal detonator had left seven men dead and two survivors, one missing a leg, the other his eyes. All the results of one bounty hunter's failed attempt at fame. A smooth, yellowed patch of calloused skin covered what should have been the left eye and socket. Shortly after losing the right eye to radiation, it was replaced with the cybernetic optic.

Flushed with cold sweat, Toob stammered, "I... I knew that rascal... Tait Ransom... would find you," he croaked. Seized with a violent spasm of pain, the Corellian cringed, coughing. Moaning miserably, he relaxed against the pillows, temporarily trapped between unconsciousness and waking.

"Easy," Drake crooned. "You're safe now. Save your strength." His words fell on deaf ears as he gathered the covers beneath the old man's neck. "Nik!" he hollered into the internal comm. "Raise my cabin temperature by 10 degrees."

Drained and demoralized by the fall of a childhood hero, Drake held onto Toob's hand, resting his forehead against the cold, unyielding flesh, as if anchoring the Corellian to the material world. Inundated by a flood of childhood images, he grinned, recalling the bawdy words of a smugglers' bar song, one that Toob had often used in place of a lullaby. Remembering the warmth and power of the man's embrace and the hoarse chorus of words, he began to sing. "I've been on both sides of a blaster. I'm known by the enemies I keep. I'm punching up a jump to disaster. Sweet lady," he yawned mightily, "sweet lady, kiss me, kiss me please." Drifting, he mumbled, "I've run... the Kessel... and survived..." As the stupor of exhaustion stole over him, he quietly fell asleep.

* * *

"I've run the Kessel and survived the show! Made the billboards in Mos Eisley; but I'm no hero, just a lonely rogue. Sweet lady, do you have something special for me?"

Startled by the blustering chorus, Drake awoke. Disoriented, he tumbled from the bunk, cocooned inside the blankets. As he raised his head to the fading shadows, he soundly bashed his forehead against the bed frame. Invoking several Socorran curses, he massaged the raised bruise and sat up in a clutter of blankets and pillows. Mentally retracing his steps, he recalled the desperate message that had carried to him to the distant world of Tatooine and his maddened attempt to break the rules of hyperspace to arrive at the prescribed coordinates at the appointed time.

Several hours had passed, according to his indicator, and the muddled Socorran could not remember giving the order to leave. Abruptly, his mind conjured the unsettling images of Toob's bloated, gray face and the jumbled voice of Tait Ransom and the coming sandstorm. Stumbling through the door, he scrambled into the corridor as the raucous chorus echoed from the aft section of the ship.

"Won't vanish in no Imperial Census! No, I won't work the Emperor's mines! Ain't scared to make that Final Jump alone, as long as I bid all my mates clear skies!" A melodic verse of Wookiee broke in between the refrain. "That a girl, Nikaede! Now, I'll go and get Drake," Toob grunted. "You head up to the cockpit and set a course for Redcap."

"Redcap?" Drake mouthed, listening to the hiss of deck plates sliding into place. Moving into the accessway, he spied Nikaede opening up the last of the drive coil shields. Toob was nearby, watching her. "Why Redcap?"

"Drake!" Toob cried earnestly. His face was still flushed with fever, his voice scratchy, inflamed with infection. "What's the matter, boy? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Crossing his arms over his chest, Drake leaned against the bulkhead. "I'm not so sure I haven't."

Grinning playfully, Toob limped over to him, palming the young Socorran's forehead with his hand. "Can a ghost do this?" he teased. He turned to the Wookiee, "Set a course for Redcap. With everything she's got!"

Nikaede hesitated. Though she liked the old man and had grown to trust him, even in the absence of her captain, she was reluctant to overstep the bounds of loyalty.

Drake grinned, his faith in friendship renewed. "Go on, Nik. Redcap."

"You have yourself a fine first mate there, Drake. Finest mechanic I've seen this side of the Outer Rim."

Not to be distracted from his question, Drake whispered, "What's on Redcap, Toob? And don't tell me it's a rubber ball conversation and that it will bounce right over my head. This is my ship," he stated matter-of-factly. "If you're up to your neck in bantha fodder, I want to know how and why."



"Fair enough," Toob conceded. For a moment, Drake could see through the thick scars and scaling skin to the old Toob, brown-eyed, flushed, and always grinning with mischief. "It's the biggest spice shipment you or any smuggler has ever seen. Enough spice to make me a king! Why, with my share, I could buy this dustball and turn it into a retirement home. And I tell you what Drake, I'm gonna make sure Marji cuts you in on the deal."

"Marji?"

"Saylor Marjan, a friend of mine from the old days." Abruptly his face darkened, showing the strain of illness and worry. "Speaking of those days, I have something for you." Pulling the chain and metallic tags from his vest pocket, Toob handed the military IDs to Drake. "These were your pop's," the Corellian whispered. "Heard he made his fortune some years back and I thought you might want to have them."

Drake took the chain, quietly staring into the metallic etchings of his father's name, rank, and unit. "A colonel?" he scoffed. "He was one of the Black Bha'li'r? Is this real?"

"Does it feel real, boy?" Toob scolded. There was a sharpness to his voice. "Your daddy could out-fly a TIE fighter with one hand on the throttle and the other on a bottle of Corellian whiskey. Called him the Socorran Scourge--" The smuggler's eye dimmed without warning. He collapsed to his knees, leaning heavily against the corridor wall.

"I gotcha," Drake gasped, holding the slumped form against his body.

"What happened?" Toob grumbled.

"I think you better lie down until we get to Redcap." Helping Toob back to his quarters, he fended off the smuggler's coming protest by adding, "You can tell me all about the Black Bha'li'r and how my father ended up being a colonel."

"Well, what you'll hear is authentic," Toob insisted. "On my bloodstripes, it's a true story."

* * *

Twelve kilometers behind and below the narrow mountain ravine, the sprawling mouth of Tyma Canyon began to vanish beneath a wandering blanket of lavender-pink clouds, a peculiar phenomena unique to the sullen gray skies of Redcap. The infamous chasm sloped and divided for several hundred kilometers, crisscrossing the barren, flushed face of the planet's surface, forming the only possible landing ledges within a 20-kilometer range of the mountain settlements above the rim.



Leaving the *Steadfast* safely hidden in the basin region, Drake bartered a bottle of Socorran raava and a few power cells in exchange for a pair of olai. Left behind in the wake of dwindling mineral resources and mine closures, the creatures were late descendants of those that had worked in the mines. Aggressive yet enduring, the animals had spent nearly a decade evolving within Redcap's hostile environment, multiplying and spreading over the planet's surface.

Drake watched the olai's ponderous head, bobbing left to right with each stride. The bulbous, hollow horns that grew and curled about the creature's head and neck gave the impression that the animal was struggling to carry its own bulk. Exhausted and moody, the mare threw her head in protest, spraying her chest and legs with foam. Noisily rasping her teeth over the metal bit, she clenched and hauled at the reins, hurling herself and her rider over the final ridge.

Loosened in a fall farther down the mountain, a broken mountain cleat clattered noisily against the iron-mounted shoe. Drake listened to the dim rattle, reliving the near fatal spill. He shook his head dubiously, wishing that he had never accepted Toob's impetuous challenge to race up the mountain. Chastising himself, Drake realized that in Toob's shadow, he was still a little boy and the smuggler had used that to his advantage.

Still shaken by the crash, Drake pressed a confident heel to the mare's side and urged her to gallop into the narrow ravine. Slumped over in the saddle, Toob's feverish face glistened with sweat and the smuggler grumbled unintelligibly. Drake gently pulled the reins from the Corellian's loose hands and attached a lead rope to the olai's bridle.

Annoyed by the old man's beguiling force over him, Drake planted a firm kick to the olai's side, ignoring a streak of red clay across his flight goggles. His eyes followed an unerring path of vague childhood memories -- obscure recollections that beckoned with the promise of help and security in the good will of an old friend. If his instincts were accurate, he would find sanctuary in the small hunting lodge, which sat only meters from the main trail, nestled in the crook of the Juteau Settlement gates.

Beyond the rustic rooftop and the modest corral, Drake could see the veiled outline of houses, shelters, and shops. Along the main road, several glow lamps had been activated, chasing away all but the most persistent shadows. From the dim, night skies, a light drizzle fell, lending an unnatural thickness to the footing. The click of the olai's metal claw echoed noisily against the rutted trail, as he swung into the front yards. And despite the unmistakable sharpness of the mountain cleats, the animals stumbled frequently.

Drake guided the mare to the corral fence and halted. Stiff and saddlesore, he kicked free of the stirrups and dismounted. With deliberate slowness, he gently swept his hands over the olai's broad back, surveying the extent of damage covering her black hide. Severely bruised by the fall, the mare flinched beneath his touch, nickering polite criticism to her handler. Vividly made aware of his own sores, emotional and physical, Drake grinned and scratched her velvet-smooth muzzle.

"Well, if it isn't the Prince of Socorro himself," a dim shadow whispered. "And one of the fallen crowns of Corellia."

Drake snorted, recognizing the familiar accent of another childhood hero. "*Ol'val*, Fahs," he greeted, accepting the Issori's steady handshake.

Far from his aquatic homeworld, Issor, Fahs' white-blond mane had grown dingy gray from time and ill-health. He wore it proudly in a ceremonial tailknot, hiding the pale, balding spot at the crown of his head. The cost of vanity exposed the smooth, rounded sides of his face, where evolution had removed primordial ears. Dressed in faded, beige pirate leggings, his skin and hair showed a lifetime ordeal spent in the vermilion clay base of Redcap. Deeply tanned and prominent with muscle, the Issori's long, slender limbs accentuated his elongated frame, lending a visible strength to the seemingly fragile stature. In the shadows, Drake noticed a slight tremor in the lean, webbed fingers, evidence of too much time spent in the local cantina, rather than in useful pursuits.

Fahs smiled generously -- a genuine warmth spread through the measure of his wrinkled but charming face. "Still not a man, but living a man's life. You look well for a common rogue, Drake Paulsen."

"That's because I'm not so common," the Socorran quipped. Inclining his head toward Toob, he whispered, "Do you have a place for us?"

"Always." Moving to the olai's side, the Issori gently cradled Toob against him and slid the unconscious smuggler from the saddle and onto his shoulder. "There, there, old man," he whispered against the Corellian's incoherent muttering.

Drake followed him to the lodge door, hesitating in the narrow frame. Acclimated to the darkness, he scanned the familiar interior, where he had spent numerous summers in the company of his father's most trusted friends. Reluctant to go any farther, he retreated to the shadows outside and to the olai, who were in need of some attention.

Nearly an hour passed before Fahs re-emerged from the lodge. "How long's he been like this?"

"Ever since we left Tatooine and before that I'm not sure." Drake leaned against the fence post, resting his forehead on the rutted wood. "Jabba ordered Tait to dump him somewhere in the desert. Something about bad luck if Toob died in the palace."

Fahs laughed. "Jabba is as Jabba does; and no one ever accused him of being compassionate."

"Someone ought to teach that slug--"

"Someone ought to leave it alone," Fahs scolded gently. "You've got much potential, Drake. Get a few more light years under your belt and in time, you may yet give the old worm his due."



"I could care less about Jabba. Right now, Toob's my biggest problem. What's going on, Fahs? What's wrong with him?" Exasperated, Drake tossed a stone over the olai pens, into the brambles on the opposite side. "It's like he's slowly going insane."

"You might say that," Fahs replied, gathering his thoughts. "On my world, the poets call it *melanncho*, a sadness so far reaching that it drives men mad. Our cousin species, the Odenji, were nearly destroyed by it some centuries back." The Issori shifted, glancing at the night sky. "When I began working on Corellia, the miners," he sniffed with conceit, "who knew nothing of the arts, called it by another name ... *brekken vinthern*."

"A broken... a bitter winter?" Drake translated.

"It's a bitter winter when a smuggler reaches the end of his days. That's where the saying comes from. They call it that because few ever survive it." Crossing his arms over his chest, Fahs yawned. "Back then, it was common to miners who worked the radiated core operations or smugglers who spent too much time working with contaminated engine parts."

"So what happens to him?"

"Well, Drake," Fahs pensively began, "men taken with it don't usually die in their sleep. I once saw a pirate who had it suffer 40 or more stab wounds before dropping out of the fight."

"Who was he fighting?"

"Himself. He thought the Empire had impregnated him with thousands of tiny transponder beacons. So he started cutting them out."

Drake swallowed with effort, struggling with the realization, "Isn't there something... anything we can do?"

"There is one thing." Fahs pursed his thin lips and stared into the thick clay beneath his feet. A stern, distant expression enshrouded his face, which was no longer handsome, but rather sinister in the shadows. "He's in the final stages of the disease. In the last few hours, he may not even know you. May turn on you in a bad way. He'll relive the past, mistaking it for the present, and he may even mistake you for an old foe."

"And when it happens," Drake probed. "What am I to do?"

The Issori never hesitated. Leaning into Drake's face, he replied, "Make certain it's your finger on the trigger and not a stranger's." Fahs moved away, taking refuge in the shadows. "There's only two kinds of sacrifice in this life: those one willingly offers and those meant to be suffered. Sometimes, it's hard to tell the difference."

"How do you tell?"

"We take care of our own, Drake. When the time comes, you'll know."

Numb, Drake trembled, avoiding the Issori's steady gaze. Staring out beyond the darkness of the olai pens, he watched a shadow move along the perimeter of the corral. The figure paused, watching them for a long moment before waving. "Who's that?"

"Lieutenant Noble Calder," Fahs whispered. "He flies escort for the *Aremin*. They're searching the area for smugglers." Winking playfully, he snorted, "Do you think he's found any?" The Issori pulled Drake close to him, massaging the boy's taut shoulders. "Calder's a good man for an Imperial, Drake. Don't judge him by what you see."

"Eventide, Fahs," a smooth voice greeted. "How goes the night?"

"It goes well," Fahs replied, accepting the Imperial's hand and imparting a firm shake. "Lieutenant Calder, this is a dear friend of mine. Drake."

"Drake," Calder welcomed, offering his hand in earnest friendship.

Drake waited for his smuggler's sense to erupt with suspicion and alarm. As his eyes registered the black flight suit, an unexpected wave of calm coursed through him, pacifying his pounding heart. "I'm really not such a bad guy," he heard the Imperial chuckle. "It's all in the uniform." Drake laughed, shaking hands with the officer.

Oddly at ease, he smiled into the handsome face and the shock of white hair crowning it. Deeply inset blue eyes were separated by an unusually angular nose, offsetting the cruelty of an aristocratic countenance.

Gently cuffing Drake's shoulder, Calder teased. "What are you doing with this old scoundrel? You're just a kid."

"He's 17," the Issori said curtly. "That's a man in our world."

Straightening, Calder whispered, "Don't smugglers believe in childhood, Fahs?"

The reply was unexpectedly sharp. "One tends to grow up fast on this edge of the Empire."

"All depends on the choices you make." Winking, he patted Drake on the head. "Good night." He started back to the mountain road, retreating through the settlement gates and into the commons.

Guardedly, Drake whispered, "Speaking of smugglers. Do you know a Saylor Marjan?"

"Know the name," Fahs replied. "Haven't seen the man in over a decade or more. I met him on Arapia when Toob and I went to collect on a debt for a crimelord named Saadoon-Kauldi."

"Saadoon-Kauldi," Drake laughed skeptically.

"You'd be surprised who we worked for back then, my young friend. Anyway, it just so happens that Marjan was the one who owed the money. Being friends, Toob let the fool talk him into running a load of spice through the Elrood sector to help him pay off the debt and maybe turn a profit." Pursing his lips, Fahs grinned with the memory. "We made it. Got the money for Saadoon. But what we made as profit couldn't pay enough to fix one, let alone five hull breaches we sustained." The Issori shook his head wearily. "Marjan was a fool. But who was the bigger fool, Toob or him, I can't honestly say.

"Toob mentioned him and something about a large spice shipment. That's why he insisted on coming to Redcap."

"It's the disease. Don't worry yourself, Drake. Saylor and Toob were friends, long ago. They had a falling out almost 20 years ago and haven't spoken to each other since." Guiding Drake by the shoulders, Fahs led the exhausted Socorran to the lodge door. "I think you could use a sip of my soup, my old mother's recipe," he chuckled. "Just right for a cold, damp day."

"Sounds good," Drake replied sleepily. Quietly, they stepped inside the cabin and closed the door, barring it behind them.

* * *

Drake awoke from a troubled slumber. The heat blasting from the hearth was stifling, almost alive with a tangible essence. Unable to breathe, the Socorran quickly donned his boots and fled the lodge, escaping into the swarthy night mists. Climbing the corral fence, he stared into the great mouth of Tyma Canyon, mesmerized by the intricate labyrinth of semi-underground ravines and hidden mountain passes, each highlighted by ivory marble shading and open, black voids, exposed beneath the dim light of the stars.

The stillness of the night erupted with the distant shriek of a landspeeder engine, reverberating from the cliffs and projecting echoes farther down the mountain. As the vehicle approached, Drake jumped down from the fence, taking cover behind the water trough. He watched as the speeder's headlamps pierced the darkness, lurching unsteadily from side to side as the craft swerved, narrowly missing the settlement gates before righting itself on the trail.

The Rodian driver shrieked as a bottle of daranu slipped from his grasp and shattered against the steering bar. Desperate to save the last few drops, the Rodian braked sharply, nearly launching himself and his passengers from the vehicle. Beside him in the front canopy, a Sullustan hooted several seething curses as his forehead connected with the dash leaving a noticeable dent in the storage compartment.

From the back seat, two human men howled with delight. "Don't get the wind up your tail, Nio!" one of them bellowed in Basic. "Here," he threw another bottle to the elated Rodian, "have another. There's plenty where that came from!" Saylor Marjan swayed precariously before sitting back into his seat. Momentarily, he barked, "I can't believe you brought a kid in on this thing, Toob. What were you thinking?"

"You let me worry about the boy," a hoarse voice replied. "I'd take him over any one of you jet juicers." The smuggler gagged as a fit of coughing assailed him.

"As long as he can fly escort in my Z-95," Marjan recanted. "I'll cut him in on a fair share."

"That's all I ask," Toob wheezed. "Now let's get going." Abruptly, the Rodian gunned the engine and the landspeeder veered, sideswiping the mountain wall and rattling its passengers. Marjan swore vehemently, batting the driver over the head with a meaty fist. Grumbling obscenities, he snatched the bottle from the Rodian's trembling hands and shattered it over his scaly head. "Now do it right!" he snarled. Weaving, but steady, the landspeeder resumed its course, accelerating down the mountain road to the canyon trails below the rim.

Frantic, Drake sprinted across the small compound, hurdling a workbench of abandoned engine parts. Sliding to a halt as Fahs emerged from the doorway, he sputtered, "Did you--"

"I heard," Fahs gushed, handing the Socorran his blaster, shirt, and coat.

"How could he even get out of bed!" Drake asked, shrugging on his shirt.

"It's the nature of the disease," Fahs replied, anxiously staring down the trail. "Up, down, totally unpredictable, particularly in the last stages."

"Where do you think they're headed?"

"The Laughing Bantha, probably."

Buckling his blaster around his waist, Drake stumbled toward the olai pens. "I'll take Garish Ridge and head them off."

"Rains washed it out," Fahs warned, leading one of the olai behind him. "It's certain suicide, even on an olai." As Drake settled into the saddle, the anxious Issori whispered, "Watch yourself."

Drake flashed a reassuring smile, charming the Issori's fears and his own. "I'll take care of him." Activating the beacon light on the mare's harness, he whistled encouragingly and spurred her onto the trail, galloping recklessly into the narrow mouth of the canyon passages beyond the settlement.

"I know you will, boy," Fahs sighed, exhausted. He watched the beacon light dim over the ridge trail. "I know you will."

* * *

Barely an hour out of the rim, Drake leaned over the mare's neck and slapped the reins against her lathered shoulders. He could see the Laughing Bantha just below him and could hear the characteristic shriek of blaster bolts coming from that direction. He reined the mare off the trail and into the rocky slopes above the tavern. Disengaging the light apparatus, he slowly worked his way down the hazardous slope, desperately scanning the shadows and the arc of laser fire from each side of the establishment.

On the left, he could make out the white-on-black armor of Imperial stormtroopers as blaster shots briefly illuminated the area behind the bar. Opposite them, he saw the smoldering remains of a Rodian and a Sullustan sprawled in the mud. The Sullustan was still alive, its arm badly wounded and dragging at his side as he crawled toward his companions, who were pinned down behind the landspeeder. A stray shot effectively ended his struggles.

"You're on your own this time. Marji!" a voice bellowed. "Ain't up to me to fix this one!"

Recognizing the harsh quality of Toob's voice, Drake guided the mare in that direction. From his vantage point, he could see that the stormtroopers were preparing to charge the outnumbered, outgunned smugglers. Using suppressive fire to their advantage, they delayed the attack as another detachment of stormtroopers moved into position on the outer flank.

Drake galloped out of the high ground, making a bold sprint across the field of fire as dozens of Imperial soldiers took aim. Lashing the mare beneath him, he dodged a frenzy of blaster salvos by spurring the temperamental olai up and over the disabled landspeeder. Fiercely checking her with the reins, Drake spun her about, balancing over her cumbersome neck as she reared. "Come on, Toob!" he shouted, momentarily making eye contact with Marjan.

Pale with hysteria, Marjan screamed, "You can't leave me, Toob!"

Pulling himself up by the stirrup, Toob hissed, "Curse your luck, Marji!" Savagely, he struck the smuggler in the head with his boot, smearing red clay over his face.

Drake clicked his tongue against his teeth. The olai responded strongly, rearing slightly before galloping away from the muddle of shouting voices and blaster fire. Protested the extra bulk, the mare bucked with serious intentions of throwing her riders. Irritably bouncing her hindquarters every few strides, she threw her head and kicked up her heels, stumbling in the unstable clay. Drake snatched the reins, guiding her back onto



the road. It was a desperate struggle as the mare fought back, unable to compensate for the shifting weight and the reckless flight down the mountain. Lengthening her stride, she obeyed, galloping down the steep canyon slope, twisting her ankles and knees with every step.

Drake kept his heel at the mare's side, insistently spurring her. Behind them, he could hear the fading sounds of pursuit. Every few strides, the noise of stormtroopers trapped up to their knees in clay would lessen. The Socorran grinned wryly, praising a night full of torrential rainstorms that had precipitated and allowed their escape.

Making one last effort to resist, the olai mare violently threw her head. The blow connected with Drake's nose with the snap of bone. The Socorran fought to keep the mare's head under control, effectively keeping her on her feet. Behind him, Toob shifted to the side, nearly staggering from the olai's back as the mare hastily jumped an outcrop of rock. Squealing in terror, she landed in a quagmire of wet clay, desperately thrashing her hind legs to escape the bog. Despite her efforts, the mare staggered and collapsed to her knees. Sparks flew from her cleated shoes as she thrashed against the jagged rocks, which were scattered along the trail. Somersaulting into the air, she threw both riders before landing again with a bone-shattering impact against the hardened mountain road.

Controlling his fall, Drake tucked and rolled. Trapped by momentum, he continued to plummet, head over heels, down the mountain pass. In the confusion of nausea and vertigo, he heard the mare's wretched cries behind him, as she crashed down the rugged slope and into the canyon basin. Accelerating down the incline in a maddening tangle of legs and reins, the olai bounced over and above him, striking him in the side with a flailing hoof. At the base of the mountain, he slammed into her, knocking his head against her unmoving body. His last sight was that of the late night sky, violet, pink, and then endless black.

* * *

Frightened by unknown injuries, Drake winced, making no attempts to move. Testing each limb, he was satisfied that there was no permanent damage and struggled to sit up.

"Drake?"

"Toob!" he gasped, recoiling as the sound of his own voice exploded within his skull.

"Who taught you how to ride, boy?"

"You did," Drake grumbled. "Remember, you bought me a dewback from Tatooine."

The Corellian chuckled with the memory. "Well aren't you a sight." He helped the boy to his feet. "Nothing broken?"

"No," Drake pouted, then curtly, he demanded, "Do you mind telling me what that was all about?"

"Gunfight," Toob huffed, pulling the saddle bags from the olai's body.

"A gunfight? With Imperial troops?"

"Well, I didn't start it!" the smuggler defended, grinning mischievously. "But I did intend to finish it. What the... whoa!" Abruptly, the olai stirred, violently lurching to her feet. Broken in the fall, her front legs collapsed under her at a peculiar angle and she fell, sprawling to the clay floor. Blood trickled from her mouth and ears, as a mixture of fluids seeped from her nose. Blowing and grunting in agony, she again struggled to her feet, succeeding by standing on her hind legs. Desperate and exhausted, she flopped back down to the ground and roared unsteadily. Whinnying pitifully, she stared at her human handlers, pleading for support. "There now, old girl," Toob crooned softly. "Drake?"

Through a dark tangle of brown bangs, Drake stared past the mare into the shadows beyond her. Hesitating, he thumbed the restraint from his blaster and cocked the pistol against its holster. "Go on, Drake, don't let her suffer," he heard Toob's soft voice against the wind. Taking strength from the familiar handle, he drew the blaster and fired, killing the mare instantly. Twitching briefly, her contorted limbs ceased their struggles -- she was still.

Turning his back on the corpse, Toob rasped, "Might want to call your Wookiee partner and let her know we're coming."

"Can't," Drake replied in a meek voice. "Comlink's busted. Remember that fall up the mountain?"

Toob's ruined face mustered a look of confusion. "We did?"

"You don't remember?"

Shrugging it off, Toob started down the trail. "Doesn't matter now. Let's get back to the ship. I think we both could use a good stiff drink right now."

Troubled, Drake fell in behind the smuggler, following the starlit trail. "You know, Toob," he began gingerly, "being retired and all, you might want to consider slowing down. Maybe find yourself a few decent friends."

Without turning to look, Toob grumbled, "What? Just because I have one good eye and a few extra pounds, I have to take up farming?"

"Well no, but you have to admit, that little stunt up the mountain could have been fatal."

"You're starting to sound like my brother -- careful, calculating ... dull."

"It wouldn't hurt for you to take a few lessons." Drake hesitated, then he added, "If you had listened to him, you would never have gone to that warehouse on Ottega."

Toob halted abruptly, growling, "Karl went because he wanted to! No one asked him to go!"

"What was he supposed to do, Toob?" Drake probed. "He's your brother. Someone had to watch your back."

"Is that what he told you?"

"That's what happened, Toob, and everybody knows it."

In grim silence, they walked the last few kilometers down into the rutted canyon gorge, following the trail to the landmark Ruck's Rut, a geographic phenomena of multi-level rifts and fissures which could hide and shelter any number of light freighters and small spacecraft. Moored on a sturdy ledge, only meters from the earthen clay floor, the *Steadfast's* support struts showed the vermilion taint of the soil base, evidence of her stay on the dismal red planet.

Nikaede loped across the ramp, her voice booming from the interior corridor, reverberating in the close quarters. Drake grinned. There was no mistaking a traditional Wookiee homecoming. Bracing himself, he did not resist and felt himself being lifted several centimeters from the ground in the Wookiee's powerful arms. Exhausted, he simply relaxed in the torrential splash of black and silver fur. Setting her captain back on the ground, Nikaede bellowed mournfully, eyeing the bruises and nicks all over his face. The smell of blood was pervasive and she whined for an explanation.

"Later," Drake whispered, glancing past her. Without comment, Toob walked by them and into the ship. Briefly, the Corellian reappeared, swinging a bandoleer of power packs over his shoulder. "Toob?" Drake trotted after him, gently taking the smuggler by the sleeve. "What are you doing?"

Toob snatched his arm free. "I'm going to finish what someone else started." He resumed his walk toward the mountain trail, grumbling irritably to himself. Tapping his foot impatiently against the rock floor, he paused at the edge of the ridge. "Come on, boy! I'm ready to go!"

"Go?" Drake gasped, trembling.

Jamming his blaster into its holster, the Corellian growled, "It'll be just like me and your pop, when we shot it out with sector cops on Bnach."

"Toob," Drake swallowed, "Bnach is an Imperial prison planet. No one goes there--"

"Well maybe it was the Manda spaceport on a... on a," he paused, flustered by the muddled memories. "Never mind. Doesn't matter. I'm not gonna stand around while good men like Ziv Banks, Lu Esi, and Tenke Hurn are gunned down in cold blood."

"Toob, those people are dead. You told me stories about them and what finally happened to them, remember? Ziv died in a shootout at the Orange Lady on Nar Shaddaa. Lu crashed his freighter over Vedis IV, running from sector authorities. And Tenke, he was with you when that detonator exploded on Ottega. He didn't make it out."



Toob began to pace unsteadily, obviously disoriented. "Some, the finest smugglers this side of Corellia... who needs them!" he griped. "We can take that Imperial bunker ourselves!"

"Toob!" Drake pressed. "There is no Imperial bunker!"

"You've gone yellow, Marji! Curse your luck!" Toob snatched his blaster free of the holster. Set for a fatal burst, he aimed at Drake's chest. "Yellow! But you've always been that way, haven't you?"

Waving his first mate out of the way, Drake pleaded, "Look at me, Toob. I'm not Marjan."

The Corellian's face darkened as a wave of confusion overwhelmed his troubled senses. Faltering, he lowered the blaster. "Kaine? Kaine, my boy! What are we waiting for? Let's go blast a few plastic soldiers. For old time's sake!"

Remembering the Issori's warnings, Drake cautiously replied, "Toob, please. Kaine was my father. He's dead now, remember?" A profound sense of pity swept through the young pirate as he tried to bring the smuggler back to the present reality.

"Dead?" Toob mumbled incoherently, struggling with the concept. "Then... then who are you? Some punk kid!" he screeched, again raising the blaster to chest level. "You heard about me and you come to see if the old man still had the juice, eh! Thought you could earn a little blood money and make a name for yourself by taking out old Toob Ancher. Well not in this lifetime, boy!"

Agilely dodging the first blast, Drake grasped Toob's arm and ducked beneath it as the second bolt went wild, narrowly missing Nikaede, who dropped to the ground for cover. Drake tried to shake the blaster from his grip; but the hold broke. Before he could sidestep the unbalanced Corellian, he felt the abrupt heel of the blaster strike him across the chin. Reeling, he fell to the ground, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

"Nikaede! Stay put!" Drake screamed over the Wookiee. Stumbling to his feet, Drake raised his arms in surrender.

"Who are you?" Toob whispered, fury abruptly diminished. "Wipe that blood off your face and let me see you."

Drake rubbed the blood from his mouth. "Toob, it's me," he whispered, failing to hide the injury in his voice. "Drake, remember?"

"Drake?" Toob cried. "What are you doing?" Bewildered, he stared at the blaster in his hand and the swelling at Drake's chin. "What have I... done?"

"Nothing," Drake whispered. "Nothing happened."

"Nothing?" Toob gasped. Turning away from the Socorran youth, he stared into the darkness beyond the ridge. Incensed by the thought of betrayal, he threw the blaster against the rocks. "Never should have left Tatooine. Should've... should've put a blaster to my head and..." Exasperated, he rasped, "Go on, Drake."

Make certain it's your finger on the trigger... not a stranger's. Drake inched, remembering the Issori's advice. "Toob?" he croaked uncertainly

"Go on to bed, boy," Toob replied reprovingly. "We'll talk again in the morning."

Against better judgment, Drake surrendered to the little boy inside him, the awestruck child who admired and adored the brash Corellian. Disoriented and obedient, he retreated to the ship. "Come on, Nik." Badly shaken, he strained to shove the infuriated Wookiee onto the ship, pulling fur and skin to coerce her up the ramp. Rubbing a trembling hand over his bloated face, Toob cursed himself. Remembering the words from an old smugglers' ballad, he softly sang, "Who fears the bitter breath of winter? A man who's never known the cold. Sweet lady, there is nothing colder," he paused, massaging his troubled brow, "than the heart of a smuggling man grown old."

Experiencing the dying Corellian's sense of loss and desolation, Drake accompanied him, silently whispering the chorus. "Night falls and I am far from my home. Caught between my cradle and my grave. Caught between the cradle and the grave."

* * *

As Nikaede's gentle hands shook him, Drake stirred. "What?" he mumbled, groggy and stiff from his adventures. The Wookiee barked softly, pushing the comlink to his lips. "Who?"

"Drake!"

Recognizing Fahs, but not the panic in his voice, Drake snapped, "Toob! Not again! Where--"

"Never mind searching for him. He's not even on the planet." Fahs paused for effect. "Somehow he managed to get hold of a Z-95 Headhunter. What's he up to, Drake?"

"Haven't a clue," Drake replied, clamoring for his boots. "He can't be too far away."

"Well hurry, the ruckus is all over the Imperial frequencies."

"We'll find him." Tossing the comlink aside, Drake sprinted up the corridor to the flight cabin. "Boost the sensor array and scan for recent ion traces," he ordered as the Wookiee settled in beside him. Agilely, his hands began throwing flight switches and toggling control modules. "I know," Drake whispered to her complaints about the old man. "Just bear with me."

The *Steadfast* hovered precariously above the ridge floor, deftly sliding beneath the jagged ceiling and into the open mouth of the Tyma Canyon Basin. Despite the interference of Redcap's dense stratosphere, Nikaede easily located the ionic blast trail. Examining the sensor data, she confirmed it and broadened the sensor sweep to include the surrounding space above the planet. With a forlorn groan, she made a disturbing discovery.

"You found him!" Drake cheered. "Where?" A capricious snap from the Wookiee unnerved him, as did the four unidentified blips on the sensor screen. "Punch into their frequency."

"Veerpal Squadron, where are you?" a desperate voice cried. "We are under attack! Respond immediately!"

Nervously, Drake watched the on-board flight computer flash through its library of schematics, confirming the presence of an Imperial Star Galleon and a Z-95 Headhunter. Approaching swiftly from the far side of the planet, two Imperial Assault Gunboats were closing at intense velocity to engage the intruder.

Nikaede groaned, a panicked whine reverberating in the back of her throat. Wistfully, she read off the information to her captain. "Two ion cannons, two laser cannons, and two missile launchers with eight concussion missiles a piece." It was Drake's turn to groan. Throttling the *Steadfast's* engines, he guided the freighter on an intercept course with the Imperial assault ships.

The Star Galleon had the look of manufacturing newness, its hull glowing ivory-white in the dim hollow of space. The vessel had never seen true combat time -- this much was obvious from the incompetent handling of its turbolasers. Galleon and crew relied heavily on its predatory escort now arriving from the planet. From the blast scoring across the galleon's once pristine armor, it was evident that the Headhunter and its pilot had done their job well with several adroitly placed concussion missiles.

As Drake approached at speed, he recognized the wide, haphazard bootlegger's turns and defensive spirals, which left the galleon's gunners effectively stymied. The maneuvers were all characteristics of Corellia, the legendary homeworld that had created men like Toob Ancher, his brother Karl, and a number of colorful figures who now lived in the shadows of galactic law. Against such a pilot, the galleon's defenses were all but useless.

Drake felt his heart sink as the gunboats swung into formation, pursuing the lone Z-95 on a straight vector. Dodging a wild shot from the frustrated gunners, Drake guided the *Steadfast* into the fray, deftly eluding blasts from the Imperial defenders. Increasing power to the aft shields, he left all weapons powered down. If the Imperials were monitoring him, they would see that the light freighter temporarily posed no threat.

Adjusting for the power surge in the shield generator, Nikaede brayed anxiously. The soft-spoken Wookiee disliked their close proximity to the Imperial ship. She snapped the modified heads-up display between them, showing Drake the incoming blips on the sensors array.

"I see them!" Drake grumbled, as the lead starfighter barreled toward them, accelerating. "Open the comm. I want them to hear our transmissions." Manipulating the guidance system, he slid the *Steadfast* into place behind the fleeing Headhunter, just as a blast from the gunboats struck his stronger shield defenses. "Toob!" Drake growled. "What are you doing!"

"Settling the score, boy!" the Corellian countered with laughter. "Point for point; life for life. Now get out of my way! You're jamming my targeting scope!" He banked sharply, following through with an extreme dive, before leveling off in an attempted course back to the galleon.

Easily mimicking the maneuver, Drake fired, "You'll have to do better than that, Toob. This is insane! Now stop--" The starfighter's maneuver jets abruptly sputtered, effectively stalling the small craft. To avoid a collision, Drake spun the controls, bringing the *Steadfast* up and away from harm, opening the way for the assault ships to swoop in for an initial strafing run. "Toob!" he cried in frustration.

"Unidentified freighter," crackled a voice over the comm. "We are reading you as the *Steadfast*. Stand down and leave the area. This is Imperial business. Your indiscretion could result in--"

"Calder?" Drake gasped.

"Well, well, well," Calder crooned. "My little friend from Redcap. Nice job back there at the Laughing Bantha."

Startled by the Imperial's cool sarcasm, Drake shared an apprehensive look with his first mate. Voluntarily, he broke from the chase, allowing the assault ships to corner him. "Look, Calder, there isn't much time."

"You're right there, kid," the Imperial huffed. "Time's run out for your friend and you too if you continue to interfere."

"He's sick!" Drake protested. "He can't be held responsible for his actions now!"

"Three dead gunners and five wounded technicians say that he can."

"Just let me talk to him."

"I have my orders, Drake." Swinging wide, Calder's assault boat broke off, leaving the remaining ship to contain the *Steadfast*. Faultlessly executing Imperial defense maneuvers, the pilot chased the elusive Z-95, pressuring the smuggler until finally Toob abandoned hopes of deploying any missiles and began running from a barrage of laser blasts from the gunboat's cannons.

Eluding his guard, Drake slipped beneath the craft and rocketed toward the scene, leaving the startled pilot behind him. "Calder, pull up!" he fired over the comm. "Pull up now!" He followed the Imperial's single-minded pursuit across the rim of Redcap's atmosphere and then back across space to the galleon, recognizing the trap being laid. Abruptly, Toob slowed the Z-95, cheering as the gunboat raced past him into the blaze of the galleon's mammoth engines. Heeding the warning too late, Calder pulled up, shredding one of his five wings against the edge of the galleon's drive system. The assault craft spun out of control, rolling through open space before the Imperial pilot could regain command of the flight module.

Drake waited for Calder's gunboat to pirouette through his line of fire and then activated his forward firing lasers, catching Toob unaware. The bolts exploded precisely, disabling the Z-95's engines, while leaving the fighter intact. Toob fired his main lasers and launched the last of his concussion missiles, all to no avail. Without its engines, the Headhunter was dead in space, drifting at the mercy of Redcap's gravitational undertow.

Breathless, Calder guided his crippled gunboat back into the arena. "I'll give you one option, kid. The only option my orders allow." He paused. "Your trigger or mine."

"They got me, boy!" Toob cackled manically, freeing himself from the safety harness. He was so disoriented, he had not realized that the disabling shot had come from the *Steadfast*. "Shut me down, but not before I gave them boys a run for their money! Ha, ha!"

"Toob, listen to me."

Ignoring Drake's quivering voice, Toob shifted in the pilot's seat. "Got to make a run for it." He pulled the canopy latch. A warning siren blared nosily, signaling the imminent danger of decompression. "Toob!"

"Clamp's locked in place," the Corellian grunted, as the device failed. He hauled at the switch, sweat clouding his cybernetic eye. "Can't wait around for them to come back." Examining the blast scoring, he laughed, "They've locked me in, boy. If I can just..." he tugged at the seal, "work it... loose. I might yet slip away." Still jiggling the welded clamp, he began to sing, "I've run the Kessel and survived the show ..."

"Drake?" Calder grumbled impatiently.

Make certain it's your finger on the trigger and not a stranger's. Empowered by those troubling words, Drake whispered, "Stand by." Weaving slowly down the narrow corridor to the cradle of the ship, Drake slid down the gunner's ladder. Reluctantly, he strapped himself into the turret and powered up the heavy weapon. Focused on the crippled Z-95, he could feel the burn of the computer's targeting scope acclimating with his retinas.

In a frenzied panic, Toob continued his desperate attempts to escape the canopy, despite his lack of an environment suit. Enraged by the confined area, he removed his helmet and began bashing his head against the seal, smearing the reinforced glass. Abruptly, he paused and stared from the smudged canopy, into a great expanse of configurations and colors, toward the only recognizable shape his mind could grasp, the *Steadfast*. "There now, old girl," Toob crooned, hearing the screams of the dying olai in his mind. "Go on, Drake," he whispered. "Don't let her suffer."

Drake squeezed the trigger. A burst of energy buffeted the disabled Z-95 and it erupted into a ball of imploding flames. The blast propelled wreckage and shrapnel over a wide area of space. Massaging the bridge of his nose, Drake closed his eyes as a tear fell across his cheek.

"*Aremis*, this is Lieutenant Calder confirming one hostile dispatched. Veerpal Squadron standing down." As the second assault craft sped back to the planet, the Imperial pilot lingered among the blast-scored debris. "Look, if it's any consolation to you, Drake, your friend didn't leave you much of a choice. It was your trigger or--"

"I understand," Drake interrupted. "Believe me, it was better this way." Swallowing the lump in his throat, he whispered, "Thanks."

"Clear skies, *Steadfast*. Calder out." The assault ship staggered across space, returning to its command station, somewhere below the atmosphere.

* * *

Despite the heavy cloud cover, a few stray beams of sunlight managed to pierce the gray, spreading warmth across the cold, barren floor of Redcap's notorious Tyma Canyon. Docked on the narrow landing strip, the *Steadfast* and her counterpart, a YT-1300 called the *Glory*, seemed oddly out of place: diminutive, insignificant inside the kilometer deep ridges and continental shelves of the great canyon.

The *Glory's* hull was pink, stained by her two-year retirement on the surface of the planet, hidden away in the basin where no sector authority or rival could find her. And here she had remained, while her captain traveled the galaxy in the company of friends. Still spaceworthy, the matriarchal freighter seemed to cast an aura that Drake could only define as a smuggling ship's inner pride. Every crack in her armor, every discolored shield plate, every recognizable breach to her frame held a wealth of history, symbolic medallions of her exceptional career.

Exhausted and demoralized, Drake leaned against the *Glory*, pressing his feverish forehead against the ship's cool hull. With childlike naiveté, he threw his will and all his conviction against the light freighter, in an effort to imbue her with the life of her captain. Any minute, if he concentrated hard enough, Toob would come strolling down the ramp and greet him with a hardy slap on the back or perhaps a bawdy chorus from a smugglers' ballad.

Beside him, Fahs lovingly caressed the freighter, realigning one of her docking boots with a swift kick. "She served him well, from the day he got her... to the day he retired her here in the valley." Pursing his lips, he ran his fingers along the ragged edges of the freighter. "You know, she once ran the Kessel in 20.5 parsecs."

Narrowing his eyes with suspicion, Drake stared at the Issori, wondering at the cruelty of this joke.

Fahs laughed with light-hearted spirit. "That's a bantha's pace today, I suppose. But back then," he shook his head as the memories flashed through his cluttered mind, "back then... she was something. The *Dame of Nar Shaddaa*, they used to call her. That was before the days of Tait Ransom or Elias Halbert, even that young fellow, Solo. Them boys weren't even born when this very same ship," he slapped the freighter proudly, "was entertaining underground royalty and thumbing her nose at sector authorities across the galaxy." Scratching the back of his neck, Fahs nervously hummed a somber tune. "I don't suppose you want to fly her back to Socorro. I don't have much need for a ship nowadays and... i know it would tickle Ancher to see her again."

"I'm not ready to go home, Fahs," Drake whispered, avoiding the Issori's eyes. "Not yet." He felt Nikaede's shadow fall over him and listened to her mournful wail. Leaning into the Wookiee's supportive warmth, the young Socorran ran his fingers over the *Glory's* hull one final time.

"I understand, Drake. Old men dream dreams and young men live them." Standing on the ramp, Fahs posed as if on stage. "Youth makes every heart a king and every adventure a crown to be captured." Distracted, he laughed at himself, sighing, as if a great weight had been lifted from him. "Never been to Socorro. Heard Toob talk about it. Guess I could go there, stopping by way of Nar Shaddaa. Wouldn't mind sharing a moment with some old friends." Squinting, he stared into the morning sky. "There was this pretty little gal who used fancy me. She tended bar at this corner tavern called the Orange Lady .." he flashed a roguish smile. "Well," the Issori chuckled, blushing profusely, "that was another time... another adventure... long time ago." Winking, he keyed the ramp closing sequence, "Clear skies, little prince -- wear your crowns proudly."

Sheltered beneath the *Steadfast*, Drake and Nikaede watched as the antiquated freighter teetered precariously over the makeshift landing field, hovering unsteadily beneath Fahs's control. Relearning the subtle shifts of the flight module, the Issori settled the freighter, banking sharply over the canyon ridges and up into the clouded atmosphere above the planet.

Drake sighed, finding an inner peace imparted to him by the Issori's wit. "How fast do you think she is?" he asked, fondly glancing over the *Steadfast*. Nikaede shrugged, grumbling multiple quantum equations and theories. "Only one way to find out," the Socorran mused. Whistling a jovial tune from a smugglers' ballad, he met the pragmatic Wookiee's challenging snarl with a warm smile. "Set a course for the Kessel system."